The life of Musorgsky

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1 Childhood and youth, 1839–1856

Modest Petrovich Musorgsky was born into an ancient gentry family in Karevo, Pskov province, on 9 March 1839, the fourth son of Pyotr Alexeyevich Musirskoy and his wife Yulia Ivanovna, née Chirikova. Legends and superstitions came to surround this event, and in general the precarious act of physical survival within the family. In 1832 the couple had lost their first son, Alexei, at the age of two, to a local epidemic (probably of smallpox); a second son, also called Alexei, was born a year later and he too died of the same disease, also under two years of age, in 1835. When Yulia Ivanovna gave birth to a third son in 1836, there was some talk of naming him again Alexei – Pyotr Alexeyevich, himself an only son, very much wished to honor his father in this traditional way – but that decision was overridden in favor of Filaret, a somewhat unusual Russian name. Some years later, Yulia Ivanovna began to call her elder son openly by his baptismal name, "Evgeny," usually kept private and known only to parents and godparents. Biographers have since surmised that the couple's use of these less common names and double-names was supposed to "deceive death," which had known all too readily where to look for an Alexei.

Children born into the Russian Orthodox faith are baptized after one of the saints or martyrs associated with their birth day; this venerable figure then becomes their patron and protector. A fourth son was born to the Musirskoys in 1839, on a day (9 March) that yielded up

many sanctioned names, including such standard fare as Alexander, Ilya, and Nikolai. But again an unusual, out-of-the-way name was chosen: "Modest," from a Latin root meaning unassuming, humble, he who lies low. As one commentator has suggested, "The mother did not wish to select one of the names of the martyrs – in order to protect her child, to conceal him, if only by the semantics of his name, from the glance of fate that had carried off two of her children in their infancy."[1] The two surviving brothers were raised as precious, even as miraculous, escapees from the ordinary route, which was death.

How to celebrate the survival of children and how to deceive, appease, commemorate, and honor the fact of death: for the composer, these themes were to become very productive both dramatically and musically, filling the place that in other composers of his century was taken up by romantic love. The idea of children learning how to give the slip to Death hovers as an anxious shadow over the prehistory and early life of Modest Petrovich. In the 1870s, these themes would give rise to a piano suite, *Pictures from an Exhibition*, composed in despair over the death of a close friend, and to two song cycles, *The Nursery* and *Songs and Dances of Death*, unmatched in the annals of vocal music. The topic surfaces near the end of Musorgsky's life in a multitude of tiny, accidentally surviving details. In an epigraph, for example, written on the blank title-page of a blank music manuscript in 1880 – a year of destitution, humiliation, chronic alcoholism, and self-deception: "In the name of Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin," Musorgsky jotted down, "Neither glory, nor title, nor talent, nor power – nothing can save you; fate has so decreed!"[2] (The lines are Marfa's from the soothsaying scene in *Khovanshchina*; the plot is the exile and divestment of Prince Golitsyn's ancient house as part of Peter the Great's gradual elimination of Old Muscovy.) The Musorgsky lineage was likewise ancient, although it had never been numerous; in each generation several would survive but more would be cut down. It became extinct in 1984 with the passing of Filaret's granddaughter Tatiana Georgievna Musorgskaya, who died childless, the last to bear the family name.

Material on Musorgsky's early life is scanty. The most straightforward matters have been mystified (for example, the composer himself always gave his birthdate as 16 March, whereas it is actually 9 March), and to this day, debates continue over the correct spelling and pronunciation of the family name. There were irregularities in the Musorgsky family tree. The composer's father, Pyotr, was born out of wedlock, the son of an enserfed peasant woman by her gentry master, and legitimized only when he was already fully grown. How did this fact affect the way he viewed himself, his progeny, and their prospects in the world? What special anxieties or ambitions might he have passed on to his sons? (Not surprisingly, Soviet-era accounts of Musorgsky's life elevate the importance of this "peasant grandmother" to stellar heights, crediting her commoner's blood for everything from Musorgsky's perfect Russian ear to his dislike of Western musical practices.) And finally there is Musorgsky's own fondness for cover-up and masks – especially around beloved objects – which makes any reconstruction, even that of an obviously happy childhood, a risky enterprise. Nadezhda Purgold, long an intimate of the nationalist composers and later Rimsky-Korsakov's wife, wrote in her memoirs that "Musorgsky was an enemy of the routine or the prosaic, not only in music but in all aspects of life, even in minor details. Simple, ordinary words repelled him. He even managed to change and mangle surnames . . ." (MR, 36). Again evasion; again, slipping out from under the eye of fate. This lack of documentation and network of myths has been confronted in various ways by his biographers.

The first in this role was Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906), art critic, eminent functionary in the St. Petersburg Imperial Libraries, and indefatigable propagandist for Realism in Russian music. He befriended Musorgsky early and remained a precious, if possessive and opinionated, source of support through very difficult years. (In the 1870s, Musorgsky began to address him in letters as *généralissime*.) Two weeks after the composer's death, Stasov was already penning his first biographical sketch – a tendentious image that was to hold sway for a century. Not much competed with it. Musicologists in search of lore and

local records did not begin to make field trips to Musorgsky's native Pskov region, 250 miles southwest of St. Petersburg, until the early twentieth century, long after all eyewitnesses had passed on. The first full genealogy for the family was compiled only in 1917.

Soviet scholarship culminated in a massive (although not uncensored) chronicle entitled *Musorgsky's Works and Days*, a "biography in documents" published in 1963. Out of its 600 pages, only seven are devoted to young Modest's first fifteen years. Most of the material assembled for the early years are retrospective accounts recalled (or constructed) from a great distance: unreliable recollections of a classmate ten years Musorgsky's junior, two casual pages by Filaret commissioned by Stasov in 1881, which omit all mention of growing up in Karevo; the composer's own quasi-fictionalized handful of paragraphs for the *Musiklexikon*, drafted in 1880, a year before his death. "What do we know about Musorgsky's childhood – the time when the personality of the artist-musician was being shaped and formed?" asks the editor Alexandra Orlova. "Almost nothing at all."[3]

By the 1980s, new methodologies on this slender information base were being tried out by Russian biographers. One result was a curious 700-page study of the composer's life by Roald Dobrovensky entitled *The Poor Knight: a Book About Musorgsky*, published in Riga in 1986.[4] It supplements early gaps in the biography with fictionalized episodes labeled "TK" (Russian initials for *tumannye kartiny*, "misty pictures"): scenes and dialogues that might have occurred but could not be documented. More in the scholarly vein is the sleuthing work of Nikolai Novikov, who in 1989 published a popular volume on the composer's formative years entitled *At the Source of Great Music*.[5] Novikov is a *kraeved* – that is, an ethnographer who specializes in a particular region [*krai*], its topography, its local records – and not a biographer. Whereas most biographers work from the top down, after the famous personality has already emerged and left a unique mark, a *kraeved* accumulates data from the bottom up, from the general unrecorded or routinely recorded life of a region, its patterns and statistical likelihoods. Ideally, then, the *kraeved* operates the way real time operates, not

knowing in advance which infant will later be famous or which trinket will come to have biographical value. He or she begins by examining all existing "documents" (official records, geography, folklore) without any special brief for the biographical subject – and then assumes, in those cases where documentation for a particular family or event is absent, that the ordinary probably occurred. Although Novikov also admires his subject, acts the detective, and devises hypotheses, he does not go the route of "misty pictures." And he succeeds in clearing up a number of misconceptions simply by de-sensationalizing events and putting them in a broader social context. This chapter will take the "ethnographic" corrective into account when retelling Musorgsky's early years. Optimally, inconsistent memoirs can be brought into balance with the best stories still intact.

The Musorgsky genealogy can be traced back to Riurik, Viking founder of Novgorod in the ninth century. In family records the name is spelled a half-dozen ways (Muserskoy, Musarsky, Muserskoy, Musursky); the composer was registered at birth as a "Musirskoy." The elusive "g" appeared only in 1863, apparently on Filaret's initiative, and his brother inconsistently adopted it. (At the root of the family name is the lexeme *musor*, Russian word for garbage, an epithet believed to have been attached to a foul-mouthed ancestor in the fifteenth century. With the "g" added, a more seemly etymology becomes possible from the Greek *musurga*, meaning artist or musician.) There is still controversy over pronunciation. Should the accent fall on the second syllable, "in the Polish fashion," which Filaret preferred and which tended to muffle the unseemly root, or on the first syllable, technically correct in Russian and the usage endorsed by the composer for most of his adult life, despite (or perhaps because of) its degraded resonance?[6] Musorgsky made sport with the *musor* root in his signatures and self-epithets, signing his letters "Musinka" or "Musoryanin" [garbage-dweller]. Such caprice with names and "humble origins" was part of his talent for masking. Filaret, by far the more humorless aristocrat, did not share his brother's playfulness.

This detail too has implications for the elusive psyche of our subject. The composer's correspondence overwhelmingly supports the view that he considered himself none the less a nobleman for these low patches in his otherwise distinguished lineage (the "foul-mouthed" ancestor, the serf grandmother, the tardily legitimized father). He felt no more demeaned than Alexander Pushkin (whose great-grandfather, a black Abyssinian, was brought as a curio to the court of Peter the Great) had felt diminished by his exotic genealogy. Quite the contrary: genuine aristocrats, he surely divined, take offense at nothing, can absorb anything, and are always inclusionary and inventive rather than exclusionary. The tact with which Musorgsky accepted criticism, his skill at deflecting it, his gratitude for the support of others combined with his occasional shocking crudeness against abstract ideological foes, and, most of all, his unwillingness to obey his mentors when bounds were overstepped: these were aristocratic traits that Stasov, Balakirev, and others with a stake in Musorgsky's development could only read as weakness or stubbornness. On occasion these traits were read (as in one famous exchange of letters between those two exasperated mentors in 1863 over their twenty-three-year-old mutual friend) as "idiotism." Musorgsky did not delude himself about these incongruities. "I am discovering something in myself that is already obvious – a kind of looseness, a softness," he wrote with excruciating openness to Milii Balakirev on 11 March 1862. "You called it *doughiness*, I now recall, and I was a little hurt, because dough has the quality of retaining the impression of dirty fingers as well as clean ones. – However, I intend to get rid of this softness, it knocks me out" (L, 39).

As posterity has since confirmed, this root "idiocy" – or idiosyncrasy, singularity – of Musorgsky's nature was not at all that of a holy fool or village idiot. That image, so often and carelessly attributed to the composer, is one more passive projection back onto the creator of his own creations and masks. More likely, the composer's contrariness (which, according to Mme. Rimsky-Korsakov, could not abide the merely "routine and prosaic") was yet another attempt on his part

to break free from that menu of received, restricted options that could easily seem, but in fact did not have to be, inevitable: in the functional harmony of his time, in the fate of his two elder siblings, in the very shape of Russia's destiny. Along some matrix the composer alone could map, a way out would be found. But could art be a "means for conversing with people" if this difficult task – providing some freedom of movement where everyone else saw and heard the hand of fate – was at the core of the conversation? Can a source for these quests be found in the formative years?

Stasov reports very little about Musorgsky's childhood, beyond vague mention of a German woman in Karevo who taught him music. No reminiscences have survived from Filaret Petrovich. Filaret's granddaughter Tatiana Georgievna did not have much early lore to relate, but she did remark that the older generation – her parents and grandparents – believed "a child should grow up surrounded by children" and that the Musorgsky youngsters, "according to family tradition, always played with the peasant children." Modest Petrovich himself gives us a bit more. In the opening of his *Musiklexicon* "autobiography" for this early period we read:

> Son of an ancient Russian family. Under the direct influence of his nurse, he became familiar with Russian fairy tales. The acquaintance with the spirit of folk-life was the main impulse of musical improvisations before he had learned even the rudimentary rules of piano-playing. His mother gave him his first piano lessons and he made such progress that at the age of seven he was playing small pieces by Liszt, and at nine played a grand concerto by [John] Field before a large audience at his parents' house. His father, who worshipped music, decided to develop the child's ability – and entrusted his further musical education to An. Herke in St. Petersburg (L, 416–17).

Thus ends Musorgsky's own account of his childhood, oriented wholly around the emergence of a precocious musical performer. Instead of siblings, hobbies, local legends, family history, the effects of the natural terrain, we have, in pride of place, the piano – the

instrument of the youthful Musorgsky's first "conversations." Whatever the young boy heard, he could improvise upon; whatever else his parents meant to him during these years, most of all he wished posterity to know that they taught him to play. Although music training was routine for gentry families, still, it is of some interest that becoming a piano prodigy was perceived by the adult composer as the prime achievement of his childhood. Having a piano conveniently at hand was the major concern of his teenage years, the first piece of equipment his parents hurried to provide. All memoirists, even the most sour, note Modest Petrovich's astonishing skill at the keyboard – a skill that remained impeccably in place throughout the composer's physical decline.

Let us leave the practice room and move outside. What, in the 1840s, did this young piano prodigy see and hear in his daily rounds? Here the slow, vegetative pace of change across the Russian landscape genuinely benefits the biographer. In few Westernized nations have local vistas or whole horizons remained roughly the same from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. In Russia today, however, one can still visit Pushkin's rural estates and more or less "see what he saw"; such is also the case with Musorgsky's native region, as confirmed by singers and musicologists visiting in the 1980s. "No, here you won't exclaim, 'how beautiful!'" remarked Svetlana Vinogradova, a musicologist who had been working in the area for over a decade, after one of the centenary concerts in Karevo.

> Take a look around, there's simply nothing to fix your eye on: everything that could arouse hope, cause joy, caress the senses – it's all excluded. In nature like this there is a subtle, penetrating sense of sadness, like the face of the Mother of God on the old ikons – ascetic, tear-washed. This lake, shore, forest, the distant little villages look exactly like the gray sky, bright colors aren't appropriate here – and the artist must command a most subtle line in these places, just like the sound-palette of Musorgsky.[7]

In this colorless expanse of the rural Pskov landscape, the significant family story begins in 1828, with the marriage of Pyotr

Alexeyevich Musirskoy, age thirty, to Yulia Ivanovna Chirikova, the twenty-year-old daughter of a prosperous landlord from Naumovo (also an ancient family, with possibly a Mongolian ancestor). The bride was the fifth of eight children in a close-knit family of six daughters and two sons. They lost their mother early; from the age of seven, Yulia was raised by her elder siblings while she acted as nanny for the three youngest. Her upbringing was the customary one for well-to-do rural gentry girls. Its diverse routine included music, weaving and sewing lessons, and excellent training in two foreign languages (according to the family records, half the household income was spent on music and books).[8] The Chirikov manor house, high on a hill overlooking a lake, was a spacious structure with mezzanine and white columns. From its top stories, another thinly populated hill was visible about a mile away, beyond the church lands and cemetery: the village of Karevo.

Pyotr Alexeyevich's story of growing up in Karevo was quite different from that of his bride across the valley. Very few details are concretely known. He was probably born in 1798; in local books he is registered only as Pyotr, illegitimate son of the "house serf-maiden Irina." After three years, a patronymic was found for the little boy when his mother was formally married to the house serf Lev Parfyonov. This husband was not fictive (Irina gave birth to a second son, Avraam, who was raised as a serf); within three years, however, Parfyonov died. At that point the patronymic of the first-born Pyotr reverted to "Bogdanovich" [gift of God] – even though everyone in the village knew that his biological father was the Karevo landlord, Alexei Grigorievich Musirskoy, an officer with the rank of major in the Preobrazhensky Guards. Alexei Grigorievich did not hide his paternity. After the "orphaning," he installed the boy (along with his mother, one can presume) in the main house, arranging for him to be tutored as a *barchuk* (little *barin* or nobleman). In 1807, having inherited his elder brother's neighboring lands, Alexei Grigorievich moved to the new property with Irina and her four children (two "gentry" daughters had been born to her since her legal husband's death). But

as late as 1817 the major was still registered as a bachelor. Even with the inheritance, it took some scrimping to send the boy to a St. Petersburg *gymnasium*. As Russian nobility, the Musirskoy clan was middling poor.

Pyotr Alexeyevich began to serve at a low-ranking job in the St. Petersburg Senate in 1814, at age sixteen. After six years of assiduous work he had achieved the rank of provincial secretary. During his service in the capital, two events of enormous importance occurred: in 1818 his father, age sixty, was officially married to the "serf-maiden" Irina Egorova; two years later, the Senate legitimized her four children. The "newlyweds" lived together another eight years, until the husband's death in 1826. One can only imagine Pyotr's relief, at age twenty-two, when his greatly delayed "rebirth" from peasant into nobleman at last came to pass. Without it, he was not a legal subject of the Empire and claims to his father's property were problematic. Only now could he consider marriage himself.

The Musirskoy holdings were impoverished and small compared with the Chirikov lands. Therefore, when Pyotr married in 1828, the couple settled on the wife's estate in Naumovo. It was there that the first two Alexeis were born, and died. In 1836, during the third pregnancy, understandably desperate to leave the site of those two tiny identical graves, the Musirskoys moved to Karevo. While he was alive, Alexei Grigorievich, Pyotr's father, had always done well by Irina's extended peasant family, welcoming them as members of the household. Now the widowed Irina (with her patronymic upgraded from Egorovna to the more genteel "Georgievna") followed her son Pyotr and his wife to the new residence.

The Karevo homestead was smaller and poorer than Naumovo. It more readily provided that balance between unvarnished peasant life and high-cultural aspirations (language lessons, a piano) that the couple's fourth son Modest, born three years later, was to recall with such gratitude. In the Karevo context, the claim of the composer's grand-niece Tatiana Georgievna that "by family tradition" the Musorgsky youngsters "always played with the peasant children"

makes perfect sense. For they were, in effect, relatives. But also fully understandable was the ardent desire on the part of Pyotr Alexeyevich – who had been legitimated and ennobled by a hair's breadth – to insure his surviving sons a place in the nobility, to enroll them in the Preobrazhensky Guards in which their grandfather had served, to make sure that for them the countryside was a leisurely option but not a dead-ended fate. As we shall see in the following chapter, all eyewitness accounts of Musorgsky as a young officer stress his foppishness, his immaculate dress, his lisping French and exquisite salon manner. There is no contradiction here between "childhood games with peasants" and (as Alexander Borodin described the aristocratic, seventeen-year-old officer Modest Petrovich in 1856) "a graceful little boy . . . his hair sleek and pomaded, his fingernails manicured, his carefully tended hands those of a gentleman" (L, 28). In serfholding Russia as in the slaveowning United States, the most intimate relations flourished between masters and the members of a servitor class without any confusion or close identification of one by the other. But one thing seems certain: that Irina Georgievna's continued presence in the household (she died in 1849, when Modest was ten years old), as both blood grandmother to the boys and as an illiterate, "nanny"-like bridge to the Musirskoy serfs, must have brought her two well-educated grandsons into unusually close contact with local folklore and its rituals.

Let us now consider this second dominant feature of Musorgsky's childhood, after mastery of the piano, that he singled out in his autobiographical sketch: "fairytales and the spirit of folk-life." The Karevo lands, for all their natural abundance of forests, lakes, and marshes, were more poor than prosperous. Ethnographers and *kraevedy* who have studied the region's folklore – and local folk forms are always closely tied to economic reality – testify to "the thinness of the soil, weather conditions that were often unpropitious, the low level of harvests, and, as a result, the dominant fact of poverty among the peasants."[9] Novikov remarks that the village of Karevo in particular was known throughout the region as a "haven for widows with children";

apparently, families without breadwinners could expect to find charity there and meager subsistence. One must not confuse a Russian "gentry homestead" with an "estate," an English manor house, or a thriving agricultural enterprise in the New World. In prerevolutionary Russia, ancient aristocratic names could be found on miserable plots, working the soil alongside a small number of their own serfs. The middling rural gentry in this region – indeed, in most of Russia – lived in modest wooden houses, substantial only when compared to the shabbiness of the surrounding peasant huts; the sum of domestics (that is, house serfs, of which the Musirskoys in Karevo had over a dozen) was no indication of elegance or wealth. Idle hangers-on and superfluous servants were a sign of stagnation and inefficiency.

The richness of the region must be sought not in its economic prosperity but in its folk tradition. Here, too, the Russian *kraeved* enjoys an advantage over professional counterparts in more Westernized lands, because Russian peasant culture, like the local horizon of the isolated village, has been tenacious and slow to change. Songs recorded on the first wax cylinders by pioneering Russian ethnomusicologists in the late 1890s could well have been what the young Modest and his brother heard daily in the 1840s. Most elaborate in the region were calendar and wedding songs, *prichitaniia* or ritual lamentations (specialized for weddings, funerals, and the military recruitment season), and then, for middle-aged and elderly women, the "lament with a cuckoo" [*plach s kukushkoi*], an outpouring of human grief sung together with nature's traditional bird of sadness. The region, it appears, was a goldmine of laments. Folklorists inform us that the local manner of performance favored a strongly marked melodic line, extreme intonational expressivity, uneven and exacerbated rhythms, maximally short breathing periods for the phrase, abrupt drops of the voice to the lower registers, often in the middle of a word – in brief, rigorously stylized musical communication.

These facts of local folk music are of some importance for understanding not only Musorgsky's later evolution as a composer, but also the reception, paraphrase, and propagation of his "theories" by

friends and foes alike. In the mid-1860s, as we shall see, Musorgsky was seized by a passion for "reflecting Russian speech honestly in music." Inspired partly by early Romantic notions of musical expression and partly by the vocal placement of Russian women's folk singing (in the throat, with glottal ornamentation, rather than a more clarified "head voice"), he believed there was a continuum between talking and singing. He designed experiments to test the boundary: first, vocal "musicalizations" of children's conversations overheard in everyday life (the *Nursery* cycle) and then, on a larger scale, with a musical setting of Gogol's chopped and prosy dramatic dialogue in the short drama *Marriage*. Musorgsky began with the assumption that each person, in fact each separate utterance of each person, is subtly different. With practice, a composer could both discern this difference and formulate a unique aural expression for each context – that is, reproduce a conversation. Vladimir Stasov adored these naturalistic experiments. They were everything that "national" meant to him: untranslatably Russian, abrasive and artless in comparison with the rounded, imported *chanson* or *Lied*, and in their subject matter comic, prosaic, attractively vulgar. In part through Stasov's enthusiastic (if imprecise) writings on the topic, what Musorgsky was doing in the 1860s came to be identified with fidelity to the Russian people, to unfettered or untutored expression, and to folk forms.

But of all artistic production, "folk forms" are the least spontaneous, individuated, or free. As the laments from Karevo – and in fact all traditional peasant singing – demonstrate, such music and narrative are *not* constructed as outlets for the unique personal statement. Quite the contrary: in the interests of a stable community (and as psychological relief for the sufferer as well), the mourner is expected to adjust her grief to the stylized requirements of the song. The singer disciplines herself through form and dissolves her private needs in it. As the first gatherers of Russian folk song discovered, both solo and choral performances were subject to the same "self-effacing" logic: it was impossible to get an accurate transcription of isolated individual undervoices (*podgoloski*) one voice at a time, because heterophonic

choral performance was a single unit that lacked easily separable strands. The musical style of the folk was communal and essentially emotionless. While in the act of singing, the folksinger was not a person, but a vessel.[10]

Vladimir Stasov, who invented the image of Musorgsky, Russian Realist, and championed declamatory musical prose, never grasped this incipient "neoclassicism" of folk culture. A quarter century after Musorgsky's death, in 1904, at age eighty, Stasov was still speaking rapturously of Russian nationalism in music as the inevitable disappearance of "convention and implausibility" and as the victory of "truth and naturalness." But the "realist-mimetic" attempt to make music conform to the expressive contour of Russian speech (which Musorgsky did pursue passionately in the mid-1860s) was not a folkish project. It was, as the composer insisted, an experiment in accurate individualized expression. Its inspiration was thoroughly Western, taken from Händel and German theorists of intonation with whom the precociously intellectual Musorgsky had become enamored in his late teens. Native folk culture, in contrast, was formulaic and collective. Both the setting of individual speech and the use of folk forms required from the artist an intuitive grasp of constraints, although of different sorts. Musorgsky did not consider his investigations into individualization to be exercises in freedom. In a letter to Stasov in the fall of 1872, he thrilled over Darwin – because that great British naturalist knew "exactly the kind of animal he has to deal with . . . without Man being aware of it, he is *gripped in a vise* . . . [however,] not only is Man's pride not torn from him by this violence, but sitting within Darwin's vise is even pleasant, to the point of bliss" (*L*, 198).

This sense of constriction and subsequent aesthetic heightening is what the young Modest must have absorbed from the peasant rituals that he encountered in Karevo. Folk expression does not celebrate the individual, any more than Darwin's genius focused on the single biological specimen. Folkloric form was a "vise": it confirmed one's helplessness in the face of fate. To reconcile oneself in a dignified way to this fate, and at the same time to use one's creativity and

inventiveness to escape wherever possible from it: this was the key to survival.

Other, less morbid aspects of the surrounding musical culture surely also left their mark on the impressionable boy: folk festivities, work songs, the Russian Orthodox chants intoned in local Church services. Ethnographers emphasize the unusually high level of *pevuchest'* ["songfulness"] in the region, the fact that social messages were often sung rather than merely spoken. Every important social ritual was accompanied by "sung speech." Music here was not *added* to words; it was an indivisible part of the form and content of the verbal message from the start. Such a fused communicative unit, words plus pitch and rhythm, did indeed become part of Musorgsky's declamatory experiments. These tonally expressive genres had more individuating potential than the stylized "lament with a cuckoo," and were doubtless a more flexible part of that "spirit of folk-life" which the composer later recalled as a formative influence. His regular retreats home to the countryside, which continued into the late 1860s, were always restorative.

The above comments on peasant music culture – its points of liberation and its inherent constriction – also help to explain why Musorgsky, settled in the city and freshly orphaned in the mid-1860s, might have been experimenting precisely *against* the grain of "folk truth." In striving to give a personalized profile to every voice he heard, or to every departed voice he remembered with anguish and a sense of loss, he was trying to make that voice precisely *not* collective and generalizable. He strove to recapture a precious, singular lost image – his mother in the first instance, but the pattern of loss would be repeated. This exhilarating, if utopian, thread of hope could have been one animating motivation behind the "declamation experiments." Again we glimpse what is a leitmotif of this biography: Musorgsky seeking ways out of what he feared were dead-ended or entropic systems, the Musirskoy impulse to trick death.

In 1849, the year grandmother Irina died, Pyotr Alexeyevich took his two sons, aged thirteen and ten, to St. Petersburg. Filaret was not accepted into the family's first-choice school, for Sub-ensigns of the